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ABSTRACT

This booklet is the sixth in a series designed to assist parents who are home-schooling their adolescent children and focuses on ways to provide encouragement to home-schooled teenagers. The articles in this booklet are: (1) "First Year Surprises," presenting one home-schooling family's experiences during the first year related to the nature of success, the flexibility of home education, and the radical change in lifestyle associated with home-schooling; (2) "Decompression FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)," concerning the adjustment period during which parents and children "detoxify" from the deleterious effects of full-time institutional education and how parents and teenagers can ease the adjustment; (3) "Dealing with Doubts," providing suggestions for parents to reduce their anxiety about home-schooling; (4) "'But I Want to Go to School!'," discussing ways to evaluate the educational options for teenagers who wish to return to public school; and (5) "Ten Reasons to Homeschool through High School," including providing a head start on college, travel opportunities, work experience, improving family closeness, reducing peer pressure, and providing an opportunity to enjoy learning. (KB)

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HAPPILY HOMESCHOOLING TEENS

Encouragement

by Cafi Cohen

ED 446 846

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FIRST YEAR SURPRISES

by Cafi Cohen

Someone recently asked me, "Your first year of homeschooling, what surprised you most?" Before reading on, think about your own response to that question. What do you find most surprising about home education? What – good or bad – has come to pass that you did not anticipate?

First, a little background. My husband and I began homeschooling our sixth-grade daughter, Tamara, and seventh grade son, Jeff, in the late 1980's. We had recently moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico from San Antonio, Texas, courtesy of my husband Terry's affiliation with the United States Air Force.

Both our children had always done well in school, earning A's and B's in honors and gifted tracks. While not the most popular kids in their classes, they both had many friends. In addition, they took music lessons, swam competitively, and sang in a church choir. A full life. If you saw Jeff and Tamara then, you would have said, "They have everything going for them."

One evening at dinner, I mentioned seeing a homeschooling family on a morning talk show. Of course, home education would never work for our family. It just seemed like something interesting to discuss. Imagine my surprise when both kids said, "We want to do that, and we want to start tomorrow."

Something clicked in my mind. It was an "Aha" moment, coupled with what educationists call cognitive dissonance. Something did not make sense. Why should two kids with everything going for them want to leave school? Two day long school visits – where total on-task time each day amounted to less than one hour – answered that question. School was boring.

For several weeks, we researched homeschooling – learning about legalities, reading books and magazines, and interviewing the few local home educators we could find. Finally, we picked the day and packed up the kids' school belongings. We said goodbye to all their teachers, two of whom privately told me I was wrecking my children's futures.

The next day, with snow outside and a roaring fire inside, we nestled in our family room to read. I thanked God my kids were not on the school bus navigating slick roads and hilly terrain.

What surprised me most about homeschooling that first year, now over a decade ago? Three ideas gradually coalesced in my mind and have influenced every aspect of my life since.

SUCCESS

First surprise? There are many ways to succeed. If you talk to one hundred home schooling families, you will hear them describe one hundred different ways to homeschool. Surprising to many educationists, few homeschoolers follow state-approved curriculum. And many never get within mile of a standardized test.

That said, some homeschooling families think that traditional methods work best. They use textbooks, schedules, and grades. Many of these families closely follow a scope of sequence, a list of who learns what when.

Others love the interdisciplinary nature of unit studies. They pick a topic – academic or nonacademic – and do everything they

can with it, thereby covering typical school subjects. If the topic were, say, "Birds," they might →

*read and write about famous ornithologists (language arts)
*study the migration patterns and pathways of birds (math, geography)
*diagram the life cycles and anatomy of birds (science)
*draw birds (art)
*cook birds (home economics)

Still other homeschooling families prefer child-led learning, also called unschooling. In unschooling situations, the parents say, "Life is Learning". They encourage their kids to follow their interests. Cooking is home economics and math. Watching a PBS documentary is history. Raising turkeys for 4-H is science and math. Self-selected reading and emailing friends is language arts. Designing a WEB page is computer science. And so on.

Finally, many experienced homeschooling parents prefer eclectic approaches, using a mixture of traditional materials, unit studies, unschooling, and anything else that works. These families focus on the child rather than on a particular educational philosophy. One child might need a lot of structure. Another might teach himself so efficiently for 12-16 years that there is no need for anything more than gentle guidance.

Interestingly, all of these approaches work. What matters most is that homeschooling families experiment and decide what works best for their situation. Homeschooling is not a math problem with one right answer. Families across the nation show us over and over that there are thousands of ways to succeed.

PROCESS

My second surprise our first year was the flexibility of home education. Was it really all right to plan a curriculum and then *change the plan?* Or even plan unschooling and then decide to use textbooks? Could it be that responding to my children's interests and learning styles would work better than covering the prescribed seventh grade curriculum?

Homeschooling means freedom – freedom to choose what, when, and how your children learn. It is listening to experts (other homeschooling parents) and then making your own decisions based on your experience with your children. With teenagers, homeschooling becomes a collaborative effort, as you and your children negotiate what to learn and how to learn it.

We made so many changes that first year and moved in so many directions that many professional educators decry. Examples? First, I did away with literature and grammar textbooks. Instead, we raided the public library twice weekly. I did not worry about what the kids were reading (so long as it contained no morally objectionable material). Whether they chose third grade reading or books written for adults, fiction or non-fiction, I encouraged their choices.

Even though the kids were older, we also began reading aloud, contrary to the practice of most public school teachers, who generally do not read to children over the age of eight. I read to our teenagers. Everyone found this relaxing and entertaining. And it was a good way to sneak in classics that they would have otherwise avoided.

We also did away with grammar exercises, spelling, and cursive handwriting. Instead, our kids wrote (primarily using the computer's word processor) for real purposes – 4-H project reports, newsletter announcements, letters to friends, contest entries, and short stories, if they felt like it.

With math, we adopted techniques usually reserved for younger children. We created manipulatives (pennies, M&M's, pizza, fraction bars) to model almost every word problem. And we played games, like Monopoly, Yahtzee, and 24-Game, in an

effort to completely automate not only the four basic arithmetic operations, but also fractions, decimals and percents.

As a homeschooling parent, I had observed that the kids had difficulty with algebra every time their basic arithmetic skills slipped. So we honed those skills constantly, placing just as much emphasis on arithmetic review as on the advanced math topics they learned with textbooks. I also felt that most of the United States population had too many difficulties with mental math – figuring out the results of ten percent off, for example. So we found good mental math books (Dale Seymour Mental Math) and looked for opportunities to practice.

My purpose here is not to suggest that you copy my methods, only that you think of homeschooling as a process and make changes whenever your current approach seems like a waste of time. You have complete educational freedom. You need not wait for a new teacher or new school year. Instead, you can adapt and evolve your approach and materials as needed.

Home schooling is a process, an experimental process, at that. Be willing to make mistakes. The more things you try, the more mistakes you make. The more mistakes you make, the faster you will find what works for your family. An example? Read *Hard Times In Paradise*, David and Micki Colfax's account of homeschooling on a remote California ranch. When I finished that book, I thought, "Wow, they really made a lot of mistakes!" Nevertheless, their results included sending three homeschooled sons to Harvard.

BEYOND EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

When we first began homeschooling, I thought of it as just another educational choice. Third surprise. Homeschooling affected more than just which textbooks our children used or how many hours per day they spent studying. Home education affected how we learned *and* how we lived. Homeschooling radically changed our lifestyle.

First of all, we finally had time *with* each other and *for* each other. Where an intense round of activities and projects – including school attendance – had sapped our energies, we now had hours every day to talk, to play, even to be alone.

We loved the opportunity to plan trips at any time of year. Better yet, on beautiful days, we frequently cancelled all work and projects to hike or hit the cross-country ski trails. The freedom from school schedules also meant we could respond to family emergencies, flying out of state at moment's notice.

On leaving school, both of our children visibly relaxed within a week or two. You could see it in their facial expressions and the set of their shoulders. As they relaxed, they began to talk more to us, their parents. And they got to know each other. Even today, grown and living in different states, they remain each other's best friend.

Home education created time and encouraged flexibility in how we used that time. Homechooling also enhanced our family relationships. Bringing our children home to learn, we changed not only how they learned, but how our family lived.

OUR FAMILY TODAY

We homeschooled for eight years – all the way through middle school and high school. I began writing for homeschooling publications and speaking at conferences. Both Jeff and Tamara won substantial scholarships to their first choice colleges. I wrote my first book, *"And What About College?": How Homeschooling Leads To Admissions To The Best Colleges and Universities* and created the website, Homeschool-Teens-College, www.homeschoolteenscollege.net.

Today, Jeff, 24, is a graduate of the United States Air Force Academy, one of the most selective colleges in the nation. Stationed at Luke Air Force Base in Arizona, he now lives his teenage dream, flying F-16's. He often says, "I cannot believe they are paying me to do this." Tamara, 22, with three years of college under her belt, sells display advertising for an alternative community newspaper in San Luis Obispo, California. She fills her off hours with hiking, gardening, music, and throwing pots.

We are pleased with the results – more than pleased. We see or talk to our grown children several times each week, both of whom live full, productive lives. We continue to implement the many important lessons homeschooling taught us all that first year –

*Success comes in many forms.
*Homeschooling, indeed all learning, is an experimental process.
*Homeschooling is a lifestyle.

And one more. Homeschooling is fun! Homeschooling teenagers is the most fun of all – read my future columns to learn why you don't want to miss it.

DECOMPRESSION READINGS FOR PARENTS & TEENS

The Teenage Liberation Handbook b Grace Llewellyn
Real Lives by Grace Llewellyn
The Home School Source Book by Don Reed
Back issues of *Growing Withou Schooling* magazine
Dumbing Us Down by John Taylo Gatto
Kaleidoscapes High School and Colleg web site:
www.kaleidoscapes.com

DECOMPRESSION FAQ (Frequently-Asked Questions)

by Cafi Cohen

"He just won't *do* anything!" say the parents of teenagers who have just left school. Prior to beginning homeschooling, these parents have high hopes. They envision their older kids industriously attacking thoughtfully selected curriculum, running a business, publishing a book, graduating early, and winning big scholarship money.

Some of those things may happen, but – in the first days and weeks and months of homeschooling – reality bites. Most new homeschooling families with teens deal with an adjustment period I call decompression.

*What is Decompression?

During decompression children and parents detoxify from the deleterious effects of full-time institutional education. To understand the transition period, consider the days of kids who attend school. Most teenagers – with anywhere from 6 to 10 or more years of school behind them – have been conditioned to:

- Do what they are told all the time;
- Work within a schedule of bells and whistles;
- Ignore their interests and talents;
- Attend to meaningless subjects;
- Work for grades;
- Work in groups, and so on.

In short, school has taught them that life happens with or without their participation.

School also has absorbed the best hours of the day, when all of us (teenagers included) are most likely to create, think for ourselves, enjoy life, and learn. At best – with kids who get good grades and please teachers – we are left with good memorizers, good regurgitators, good game players. At worst, we have the

shell-shocked walking wounded – apathetic, sometimes hostile teenagers who wake up each morning and just want to go back to sleep.

During decompression The School Experience is all-too-fresh in your teenager's head. Suddenly, your son's or daughter's environment radically changes – from coercive and group-oriented to collaborative to self-directed. Suddenly, adults take him seriously. Suddenly, there is time for privacy, time to be alone.

Many new homeschooling parents – with visions of All They Are Accomplishing At The School Down The Street – panic. Parents have their own decompression experience. They worry about covering enough, college preparation, and altered opportunities for socialization.

**What can we expect during decompression?*

Physical Release

Almost all parents will see behavior changes as their teens adjust to new expectations and a radically altered learning environment. First among these is a general unwinding, a physical release. Your teenagers may sleep a great deal more. Some kids will lie outside on the grass and watch the clouds roll by for days and weeks on end. Many kids become more affectionate. Those who have seen the world as a Very Serious Place start smiling more often.

Habits

Bad habits – everything from nail biting to zoning out in front of television – may decrease. New bad habits may appear. The good news? In both cases, your teenager – minus the constraints imposed by school – moves closer to being his real self. As he tries out various ways of spending his time and evaluates his experiences, he begins thinking more often for himself.

Improved Health

Families whose kids need insulin, ritalin, and asthma medication *may* find they can adjust dosages (in consultation with a physician, of course). Many teenagers on ritalin completely discontinue its use. Almost all new homeschoolers reduce exposure to junk food, institutional meals, public restrooms, and large crowds, which results in fewer colds and flu.

Different Activities

Some decompressing teenagers drop long-standing activities, like soccer or piano lessons. Just as many dive into previously unexplored academic and non-academic subjects, like computers, reading, dirt bikes, and math games. When our then 12-year-old son left school in the late 1980's, he spent hours each day folding origami animals. Some kids, having absorbed all of the propaganda about the value of schooling, panic and hit the textbooks for hours each day. In all cases, go along, watch, and be patient.

Alone Time

Almost all decompressing teenagers spend more time by themselves. John Taylor Gatto in *Dumbing Us Down* tells us that the alone time of children who attend school, sadly, averages less than ten hours per week. This is not enough time to reflect, the explore, to think, to fashion what Gatto calls a "private self." Without this private self, too many kids lack a sense of their own identity and look to others for The Life Instruction Manual. Unfortunately, nobody can write a manual for your teenager as well as he can. Many decompressing teenagers know this intuitively, and thus seek more alone time.

"Take rest. A field that has rested gives bountiful crops."

--Ovid

*How long does decompression last?

Decompression is a period following a major life change. As with other major life changes (moving, birth, death, new jobs), both parents and kids need time to adjust. How much time? My experience and that of hundreds of families with decompressing kids indicates that you are looking at six months to two years or more. Many say that the longer your teenager has attended school, the more time decompression will take.

Parents may panic when they hear the six months to two years figure. Often they have a son or daughter that educationists have labeled "behind". These parents begin homeschooling, hoping to "make up time" and "catch him up." Too frequently, they prescribe a heavy schedule of make-up academics that would discourage most Ph. D. candidates.

Don't worry about the time your teenager appears to be doing nothing. Believe it or not, you *do* have time – plenty of it, if academics are your only concern. I have seen more than 10 teens – using independent-study materials – complete the equivalent of four years of high school academics in less than 18 months. How? Are homeschoolers smarter than everyone else? No, not really. Homeschooling itself, though – minus schedules and bells and peer-group distractions – can be remarkably efficient. When your teenager has decompressed and is ready, he will do what needs to be done – often at breath-taking speed.

*What can teenagers do to ease decompression?

Physical Activity

All people, older kids included, need fun and exhausting exercise. This may be a team sport offered by Parks and Recreation or the YMCA in your community. Our son's primarily physical activity at ages 16 and 17 was the diving team at our local Parks and Recreation department. Other teenage homeschoolers like distance running (anybody can train for and run road races), martial arts classes, bowling, hiking, cycling, and yoga. You don't necessarily even need to think "sports". Some kids prefer gardening and shoveling snow and farm-related physical labor.

Outside Activities/Volunteering

Getting out of the house on a regular basis eases decompression. Most communities boast a host of teen-based activities: 4-H, Scouts, church youth groups, Civil Air Patrol. And there are many adult-oriented groups that may appeal to your older kid, everything from ski club to Toastmasters. Volunteer opportunities for teenagers abound. Check out hospitals, libraries, museums, zoos, radio stations, political campaigns, and so on.

*What can parents do to ease decompression?

Relax

What you see during decompression is temporary. Eventually your teenager will produce something – although it may not be the product *you* have in mind! – and become one of those homeschoolers we all brag about. You have plenty of time for academics, so bury that vision of the perfectly-run high school down the street.

Calendar

Keep a calendar in which you log your teenager's activities, academic and non-academic. Develop abbreviations and code each activity with a subject name (for examples, check out the sidebar, Speaking Educationese). You keep this calendar not for the state, not for an umbrella school, not even for your teenager, who will most likely find it boring. You keep a calendar for you, the parent. From the entries, *you* will decompress and learn that education occurs everyday, in everything we do.

TV/Mindless Video Games

While some make arguments for allowing unlimited TV and mindless video games, we preferred to limit these activities. I agree with John Taylor Gatto who says that television absorbs far too much time. With my two teenagers, I found that they less they watched television (even good-for-you television), the less they stared at the four walls.

Decisions

Involve your homeschooling teenager in adult decision making and chores. If he or she has never changed the oil in the car, now is the time to learn. Redecorating or relandscaping? Ask for their help in planning. Considering a major new purchase, like a car, or changing the family budget? Ask for their comments.

Similarly, when and if you choose formal academic materials, select them *with* your teenager. Avoid large homeschooling conventions with hundreds of vendors. Instead, examine potential materials, at home, with your older kid. Try out material. If your son or daughter deems the product inappropriate, return it within 30 days and look elsewhere. Self-directed learners all share the ability to choose their resources. Certainly, there's no better way (or time) to learn to do this. Of course, you and your teen will make some mistakes. Reduce those mistakes by working collaboratively.

Gradual Academics

Many unschoolers never include any formal academics in their high school homeschooling. You may adopt that approach. Or you or your teenager may select some formal academic materials to work on. If so, consider introducing these materials gradually.

Here is an example. After three to six months of no academics, begin one month with math – say 20-30 minutes daily or three times weekly. The following month, add language arts; the following month science; and so on. This gives you both time to evaluate materials. Also, keep scheduling flexible. Eventually, your teenager may prefer 2-3 hours of one subject daily, rotating subjects each week.

Journaling

Encourage your teenager to keep to a journal, a daily account of his activities and family happenings. This need take no longer than five to ten minutes each morning, when he or she describes one or more events of the previous day. Those teens who would rather walk one hundred miles than put pen to paper should consider dictation (onto an audiocassette) or learning to use a word-processor. Separating description from transcription (pen-to-paper) often overcomes writer's block.

Self-Directed Activity

Encourage self-directed activity by respecting your teenager's interests and goals. Self-directed activity is any activity your kid does without your urging. It is what he does on Saturday, when no one is telling him what to do. Support these activities in whatever way your time and resources allow – as an interested listener, with wheels, financially, and so on. Why? It's like learning to walk before you run. Veteran homeschooling parents often describe how self-directed activity leads to self-directed learning.

Fun

Go light on the teacher aspect of home education. Don't be the nightmare homeschooling parent, the one who insists on researching the country of origin of every piece of produce in the grocery store. Yes, it can make you – the parent – feel good to point out the educational aspects of everyday life. Your teenagers will probably find such antics more boring than the school they just left behind.

Instead consider spending time on activities both you and your kids enjoy. You have very few years remaining to share the same household. Learning occurs as a by-product of fun events – like travel and playing games and cooking together and outdoor sports. Enjoy – and don't sweat the small stuff.

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Speaking Educationese

Here are a few daily activities translated int educationese. Everything is learning Surprisingly, you can call most of life "school".

*Reading the daily paper: Social Studies
*Gardening: Science
*Reading (anything): Language Arts, English, Science, History
*Drawing: Art
*4-H Activities: Social Studies, Science, Language Arts
*Bicycling: PE
*Talking with Grandma about her life: History
*Playing Monopoly: Math
*TV Documentaries/Movies: History, Geography, Science
*Painting a room: Math and PE
*Pet care: PE and Science
*Volunteering at the library: Language Arts
*Emailing friends: Language Arts
*Guitar lessons: Fine Arts
*Volunteering with a community drama group: Fine Arts and English
*Red Cross First Aid Class: Science
*Travel: Geography, social studies
*Watching an active construction site: Science

The ark was built by amateurs, the Titanic by experts. Don't wait for the experts."

--Murray Cohen

DEALING WITH DOUBTS

by Cafi Cohen

A fellow homeschooling mother recently wrote to my electronic mailbox:

"When you were in the midst of homeschooling, did you ever feel like you weren't sure what you were doing? I mean, it is all well and good to look back on the journey after you have arrived and know you did make it, but what about when you were in the midst of those years with your kids? Were there moments when you really wondered if your eclectic approach would get you to where to wanted (or I should say where your kids wanted) to go? The doubts arise over our relaxed approach especially when I am surrounded by Scope & Sequence [information] and people who hold so true to them. It is funny – I used to be so much more into planning units and making lesson plans.... After I have [experienced] this relaxed year, I don't really want to do much of that anymore. I feel as if I have become a rebel. Any thoughts for this veteran (9 years) but always-learning homeschool mom?" [California mother of 14-year-old daughter]

My response:

I always will worry about whether we did The Right Thing, just as I did while we were homeschooling our two children through middle school and high school (see examples of our eclectic "curricula" for our daughter in the sidebar, below). When my now-adult children tell me that certain college classes are difficult, I blame *me*. Surely, I could have forced more Latin or Math or History on them -- making their lives miserable as teenagers, but giving me, the parent, the mindless assurance from a Scope and Sequence that we were Doing The Right Thing.

Why do we need that assurance so badly? Think of all the brainwashing we have to overcome, and it is not a difficult question

to answer. Like most homeschooling parents I was educated (or at least trained to play the game) in government schools; and I turned out okay, didn't I? How can I reject the progression that led to seven years of post-secondary education and two degrees? (A nasty question rears its ugly head here: ultimately, did the seven years enhance the quality of my life or detract from it? Right now I do not know the answer – or just will not admit that it all really was a waste of time and simply delayed my finding worthwhile work I love.)

Like you, I was and am sometimes surrounded by homeschooling parents who heavily curricularize their children. To an even greater extent, I, like almost all homeschooling parents, was and still am surrounded by parents of schooled children, parents who automatically link learning *only* with classroom seat time and traditional teaching. The constant national debate, which sadly has changed – except in alternative education circles -- almost invisibly from debate (are national standards a good idea?) to mere discussion (how do we implement national standards?), further intimidates many of us.

Yes, I had and still have doubts. Homeschooling is not a math problem with one right answer, and even though our kids seem to be happy, well-adjusted adults, the dire warnings of didactically-oriented educationists still echo in my head.

Fortunately, alongside the cacophony of academic diehards, I have an ever-increasing number of positive anecdotes about the accomplishments of less traditionally educated children. Take science, for example. I know older homeschoolers who build telescopes and discover comets, develop new strains of tomatoes write innovative computer simulations of real world phenomena, and invent devices to help disabled relatives live more normal lives. These kids do science. Even though these activities cannot be measured by tests, surely they are just as valid, in fact more valid, than absorbing and regurgitating the contents of politically-correct biology, chemistry, and physics textbooks.

In analyzing the situation, it seems that those who do science can easily learn to absorb Textbook Science (an oxymoron if there ever was one). But does the reverse hold true? Can those who are trained primarily to regurgitate textbook science easily segue into scientific thought and analysis? Are memorizing examples of accepted scientific thought and remembering "facts" for a test the way to encourage scientific literacy? To begin to answer this, you have to ask, do we have a scientifically literate populace (most of whom attended schools)? For my money, we do not.

It is a frustrating thing for us eclectic and unschooling types to try to explain homeschoolers' accomplishments in educationalese (the language of professional educators). Usually homeschooling success is not identified or quantified in the same way. We need to look beyond the national norms and averages and test scores (even though all studies seem to show homeschoolers doing better than their traditionally schooled counterparts). Instead, individual families, using their idiosyncratic criteria, define success in ways that make sense to them. That is very difficult to explain succinctly to skeptics.

Of course, it comforts others if I quickly answer, "My kid scored sky high on the SAT," but do we want to measure homeschooling success that way? I hate the defensive posture I sometimes feel forced to assume when I reel off my kids' accomplishments. At the same time, I felt often like it was the only way to begin to answer the critics.

Fortunately, I recently had a 17-year-old begin to teach me another way.

At a homeschooling conference I listened to this young lady steadfastly refuse to resort to the defense of listing her accomplishments (although, I have heard from her father that there are many). Instead, with much more confidence than any adults I know would display, she had the nerve to insist that yes – despite not using curriculum not taking tests, despite not even studying anything in a formal manner – she was perfectly capable of learning whatever she needed to know, to do whatever she needed to do.

She saw no sense in memorizing meaningless American history dates, reading prominent English poets, learning chemical symbols, or fighting her way through geometry proofs. She said she was content, at present, to spend much of her time either snowboarding or planning to snowboard. So this is part of the answer. Just look 'em in the eye and unblinkingly tell then what your kids do. Leave them aghast, if only to drive a small wedge into their minds.

Of course, the question most people had for the 17-year-old at the conference was, "What about all the gaps in your education?" Okay, what about those gaps? How important are they? Every homeschooling family has to grapple with this point sooner or later. The parents and kids have to decide and agree on the essentials. In our case, with our two kids, the major difference between our essentials and those of any published Scope and Sequence was that our Family Scope and Sequence was very short – character development, the 3 R's, basic computer literacy, everyday living skills, and physical fitness.

I have read many Scope and Sequences. And mostly I have observed that they display remarkably little overlap. In other words, they do not agree among themselves as to what constitutes a good "course of study." That fact alone makes me skeptical about the value of insisting that my kids master the particulars of any externally-generated course of study or Scope and Sequence.

When I hear homeschooling parents worry about gaps, an additional question always enters my mind: what about your kid's positive traits? Take the teenager at the homeschooling conference. She was a personable, intelligent, articulate young lady, possessed of poise and confidence that many adults would envy. She obviously had a wonderful relationship with her parents, and I have no doubt she will achieve any goals she sets.

And then I come full circle. Even meeting such impressive teenage homeschoolers, I have doubts. Maybe it is similar to growing up very poor, as my parents did during the Depression. As they explain it, no matter how much money you accumulate as an adult, the experience of living in poverty remains and affects your subsequent behavior. Similarly the equations, School = Education = Good and Education=Money=The Good Life, are so deeply ingrained that I may never shake them off entirely.

All that said, in my experience, there are some things homeschooling parents can do to reduce their anxiety about not Covering It All. Here are my suggestions – those practices which helped me Let Go:

SUCCESS STORIES

Immerse yourself in success stories: *Growing Without Schooling* back issues, and Grace Llewellyn's books *Real Lives* and *The Teenage Liberation Handbook* contain many. At my web site are homeschoolers' college application essays that relate other success stories.

THE GOOD GUYS

Find local, like-minded homeschooling parents with whom to share experiences. Like any small minority going against the current, we need support.

SCOPE & SEQUENCE CRITIQUE

Review several Scope and Sequences (sometimes synonymous with goals, objectives, curriculum or courses of study) from different publishers and school districts. A Scope and Sequence is somebody's idea of who learns what when. You can obtain them from places like World Book Encyclopedia, A Beka Books, the Core Knowledge Foundation, or even your local school district. When you compare the scope and sequences, you will see that various sources mandate different information for each grade and that none of the Scope and Sequences list the same "essential" information to cover for all grades. At that point, you begin to see that requirements of any one scope and sequence are not critical or even essential.

DEFINE SUCCESS

What is your definition of success? Clear your mind – as much as is possible for those of us who attended school – and discuss often, with your teenager, the results you want. If you are bogged down with curriculum, think of your Family Scope and Sequence as being similar to a newspaper article that may be shortened in the editing process at any point. The important stuff comes first, later paragraphs are interesting filler and non-essential. Place the essentials first, and be willing to accept deletions at any point further down the list. Even more difficult, try to make a list of essentials that is less than five items long. In your mind, separate the major from the minor, and let some of the minor content go.

TEACHING = LEARNING? NOT!

When listening to those who highly curricularize their children, remind yourself that teaching does not equal learning. Our own school experiences tell us that covering a unit or completing a text often does not result in education or even retention.

EYE THE COMPETITION

To emphasize the previous point, make an appointment at your local high school to sit through one entire day of classes, ideally by accompanying a single student whose class load resembles what your homeschooler's would be if he attended. Then keep the appointment.

Sit through the classes and watch and listen carefully. Keep track of on-task time (reading, doing problems, discussions, taking notes) versus administrative time (forming groups, passing out supplies, fund raisers, taking roll, correcting papers, and discipline).

I have done this several times in three different states and never logged more than one hour of on-task time per five-to-seven hour day. Be aware of what you are comparing your homeschooling to. Observe the behavior of students in school. And then ask yourself who should worry about gaps.

FOCUS ON THE DONUT

Focus on the donut, not the hole. Every day, list one or more positive things about each of your children. Do not do this mentally, write it down, perhaps just on a calendar with a big box for each day. This will counteract the natural tendency that all of us have to define Johnny as a poor speller or Jenny as "no good at math" or Joshua as deficient in science.

TAKE NOTES

Motivate yourself with record-keeping. This need not be laborious. Every day – in the morning – have your teenagers list everything they did the previous day (see sample listing in sidebar). As you develop abbreviations, this should take no longer than five minutes. Some will prefer to add optional school subject designations like Language Arts, Science, and Math. Although there are good arguments made that we should not have to worry about justifying ourselves with schoolish criteria, it makes some parents feel better. In other cases, assigning school subject designations to all activities (whether academic or not) will give you the raw data for transcripts or other records required by your school district or state. Lastly, if the worst case scenario occurs and you somehow have to justify homeschooling with educationalese, you will be able to do it.

HAVE FUN

Don't take yourself too seriously. Probably most of our kids are going to turn out a certain way regardless what we do. My daughter is wired for creativity – cooking, writing, composing, drawing and painting, acting, decorating, you name it. Since her father and I have almost none of these characteristics – and did little to encourage them since we did not know how – our daughter's creativity seems innate, independent of our efforts to "educate" her. Similarly, her brother has the proverbial mind-like-a-steel-trap with respect to numbers and spatial-engineering problems. Again, not a trait that my husband or I have in abundance and therefore seemingly unrelated to our efforts. Relax. Your children's talents will surface despite what you do!

CALENDAR LISTING OF ACTIVITIES

Here are two days from my 15-year-old son's homeschool calendar. All of his days look different from each other, so what you see here does not define all of his activities.

Day 1:

Cross-country skiing – 4 hours (PE)

Movie ("Dances With Wolves") – 3 hours (History)

Reading (Roots by Alex Haley) – 1 hour (Language Arts, History)

Piano Practice – ½ hour (Fine Arts)

Day 2:

Household chores – 1 hour (Living Skills)

Run three miles – ½ hour (PE)

Reading (Roots) – 2 hours (Language Arts, History)

Playing around with circuit board – 1 hour (Science)

Bathing & grooming dog – ½ hour (Living Skills, Science)

Math problem set – 1 hour (Math)

Scrabble game with sister – 1-1/2 hours (Language Arts)

Piano lesson – 1 hour (Fine Arts)

4-H Meeting – 2 hours (Social Studies)

"BUT I WANT TO GO TO SCHOOL!"

by Cafi Cohen

A homeschooling mother writes: "I have a 14 year old that attended public school for grades K-2, then homeschooled for five years. He wanted to attend public school for eighth grade, so we let him. He agreed that he did not learn much, but enjoyed the social activities. Our problem? My husband and I think that we should homeschool him for the academics that he missed last year. Our son completely disagrees and wants to attend high school. He is bright and plans to attend college. So, do we force him to homeschool or do we let him go to public school? He is a good kid, but we saw a huge negative change in attitude and actions when he was enrolled in school."

Answers to this type of query fall into three categories:

(1) Honor his wishes – send him to school
(2) Compromise – part-time school or private school
(3) Parents know best – homeschool him

How you decide matters more than *what* you decide. *How* involves communication and research. First, you, your husband, and your son should discuss your son's current priorities, your family's priorities, and your son's long-term goals. Hold several brainstorming sessions and listen to one another.

Once you have outlined goals and priorities, think of this as a research and critical thinking project. Research means gathering facts. Critical thinking means evaluating those facts to arrive at the best decision. This is a fabulous opportunity to teach your son how to evaluate educational options, a skill that will serve him well for the rest of his life.

BACK TO SCHOOL

Explore first the back-to-school option. Some homeschooling parents reason that a teenager, especially one who has recently experienced both school and homeschooling, should have a say in how he pursues his education. They say, "Let him go to school. Any school experience is much richer when you choose it, when you are not compelled to be there." Many people do better in college (which they choose) than in high school (generally, a compulsory venue). Similarly, your son may do better at school than you anticipate – simply because he had a choice.

Begin researching school with one or more family brainstorming sessions. Discuss school attendance with your son, beginning with the following questions:
*What are your goals for your time in school?
*What activities will you pursue in school?
*What are the pros and cons of attending school?

Incorporated into your back-to-school discussions should be some ground rules. Consider a quote from a February 1996 Reader's Digest article, "[In 1995] half of high-school seniors have used illegal drugs at least once." School is not an excuse for rude behavior, late nights, and illegal activities. In addition, you and your son need to articulate how school affects family relationships, what your expectations are, and so on.

Next, even though your son has recently attended school, he should visit and observe at least one to two days of classes to inform your discussions. High school differs from middle school, and every school has a distinct culture and flavor. When observing classes, ask your son to compare on-task time (reading, listening to a lecture, working in groups) versus administrative time (waiting for others to finish, roll call, announcements, passing out supplies, discipline). Side note here – even at Very Good Schools, total daily on-

task time usually does not exceed 60 minutes. Also, ask your son to closely observe student relationships as well as student-teacher relationships. How do they treat each other?

Before he leaves the school, your son should gather more information. Interview the principal and the one or two teachers, asking them philosophical and practical questions. Examples are, "What is this school's mission?" and "How many graduates were admitted to college engineering programs in the last three years?" You, as parents, will have concerns about the school and probably want to gather some information as well. What safety precautions does the administration take?

Finally, you and your son have enough information to evaluate school attendance. Pros and cons lists (advantages and disadvantages) are an excellent approach. You and your son should make separate lists and retain them for comparison with the lists you will make for the next two options – compromise and homeschooling.

COMPROMISE

The second option many homeschooling families explore in the I-want-to-go-to-school situation are alternatives like private school and part-time school. You investigate private schools in your area the same way you checked out the public school – with visits, fact-gathering, and discussion of the pros and cons.

Part-time school attendance – at a public or a private school – is also worth considering. Depending on your state laws and local district regulations and practices, your son may be able to attend school for, say, sports and foreign language and music. You would continue to address other subjects in a home-based program. Some families find this an ideal solution for older kids who are sure they are missing something.

Other families who have tried it complain that being tied to a school schedule greatly interferes with some of the benefits of home education. These include traveling almost any time of year and the ability to volunteer at any hour of the day. When our homeschooled daughter took a choir class at a local high school one semester, their near constant schedule changes made it difficult to plan outside activities.

One benefit of part-time school is access to courses where the family lacks expertise, like laboratory science or foreign language. Some teens attend school part-time for group activities like music and sports. While many home educators find better alternatives in the community, in some smaller towns and rural areas, school is the only game in town.

With this option, you, the parents, and your son should each make that pros and cons list again – this time with the title Part Time School Attendance.

CHOOSING HOME EDUCATION

Making homeschooling a first choice for some teenagers can be a tough sell. First you deal with "the grass is greener" assumption of many teens, indeed many adults. Almost all of my children's teenage friends who attended school thought *homeschooling* sounded wonderful – often to the point where they would ask me to call their parents and explain how to do it. Some parents argue that we must learn to separate dissatisfaction with home education from dissatisfaction with the world in general

How do teens who are strongly drawn to the high school social scene end up choosing home education? Our daughter was in that situation. Every year we gave her a choice about attending school. Every year – after thinking about it – she chose homeschooling. Her two principal motivators? First, as a homeschooler, she had time for five to ten community activities, including two volunteer

positions and one paying job. With school, she would have to choose one or two of those activities and give up everything else. Second, as a homeschooler, our daughter expected to finish high school early. She turned out to be right on that point. At age 16, she graduated from Desert-Mountain Homeschool and left home to spend nine months in Australia.

One mother posted on the WEB that twice in the past two years her 15 year-old son asked to return to public school, a move she strongly opposed. She said that both times she was noncommittal, but did tell him he would have to do the footwork – make the phone calls, gather the information, schedule the testing, and so on. Her son dropped the matter both times.

So, how to evaluate homeschooling? Again, gather facts and create another list. Even though you have been homeschooling for years, you and your son should read some new materials about how families homeschool teenagers – see the Resources sidebar for book and on-line suggestions. My guess is that you have barely scratched the surface in terms of approaches and opportunities.

Following the research, make the Home Education pros and cons list. You, the parent, say you want to encourage homeschooling. I hope you include the following on the "pro" list. (That's right, I'm not unbiased, either!)

*Control over academics
*Flexibility in approach, in scheduling
*Individualized academics
*Promoting autonomy and creativity
*Head start on college
*Positive, real world socialization
*Positive family relationships

You and your son should have three pros and cons lists at this point – Public School, Part-Time School, and Home Education. You may have a fourth list for Private School. Use these lists to discuss how each option addresses both your family's goals and priorities and your son's goals and priorities. No solution will be perfect. However, Peter Drucker, a management guru, assures us, "Once the facts are clear, the decisions jump out at you."

RESOURCES

Books:

Homeschooling On A Shoestring by Judit Allee and Melissa Morgan
Hard Times in Paradise by David & Mick Colfax
The Homeschooling Book of Answers b Linda Dobson
The Teenage Liberation Handbook b Grace Llewellyn
Real Lives: Eleven Teens Who Don't Go T School by Grace Llewellyn
No Regrets: How Homeschooling Earne Me a Master's Degree At Age 16 b Alexandra Swann

Websites:

*Home Education Magazine Networkin and Discussion Boards
home-ed-magazine.com/wlcm_brds.html
*Homeschooling High School
www.caves.net/~cmmeyer/hshs.html
*Kaleidoscapes High School and Colleg Tips for Home Educators Discussion Board
www.kaleidoscapes.com/colleges/
*VegSource High School Homeschoolin Board
www.vegsource.com/wwwboard/hischool/wwwboard.html

"The highest art is the art of living an ordinary life in an extraordinary manner."
--Tibetan saying

TEN REASONS TO HOMESCHOOL THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL

by Cafi Cohen

Yes, it sounds scary. Homeschool through high school. Nevertheless, more and more people take the plunge every year. At your next homeschool conference, check out the increasing number of vendors and workshops catering to families with teenagers.

Leery about joining these folks? If so, consider these reasons to keep on keepin' on. . .

EFFICIENCY

Teenagers with good reading and math skills (through pre-algebra) can master the content on most high school Scope and Sequences (lists of Who Learns What When) in twelve to eighteen months. Yes, you read that correctly. It takes less than two years to complete an average high school academic program, including English/Language Arts, four credits; Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II, three credits; History and Geography, three credits; and Science, two-three credits; plus extras like Physical Education, Foreign Language, Music, and Computers. One credit corresponds to what most high schools call a year long course.

Of course, many homeschooling families see no reason to cross all the T's and dot all the I's on the arbitrary Scope and Sequences various educationists and publishers generate. For those who worry about approximating what schools offer, though, many homeschoolers have proved that grades 9-12 can be completed in less than four years.

How can that be? Well, it turns out that homeschooling's efficiency far surpasses that of schools. Your son or daughter need not have future-Nobel-prize-winner intellect to complete a typical year-long Biology course in three or four months (or even less, in some cases). Generally, homeschooled teenagers focus, work at their own pace, use self-instructional materials they chose, and work one-on-one with an adult when necessary. With this combination, most teens can cut the time for traditional high school courses by half. As one school defector, working at home in a self-paced program, said, "Having flunked everything, I left school the middle of my sophomore year. Now, as a homeschooler, I expect to graduate six months ahead of my former classmates."

HEAD START ON COLLEGE

Because high school does not take four years at home, many teenagers take college classes concurrent with their high school homeschooling. Others complete high school "early," say age 15 or 16, and proceed to college. Our son began courses at the local community college at age 15, concurrent with his high school work. At first, he admitted to being a little intimidated. We picked his classes carefully, though – focusing on computers and science, subjects he felt confident about. By age 16, he realized that the junior college courses offered no more challenge than typical high school courses, so the following year, he supplemented his homeschooling with university classes.

With the advent of the Internet, college during high school or early college is easier than ever before. Even if your state's homeschooling statutes make it difficult for underage teenagers and non-high-school graduates to take classes at community colleges, there are now

hundreds of institutions that offer college courses and credit via distance learning, either through the mail or via the Internet.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Homeschooling promotes self-directed learning to a much greater extent than traditional schooling. Contrast the different environments. At school, administrators, principals, and teachers dictate courses, class content, scheduling, even depth. In home-based programs, both parents and their teenagers take control of content and timing.

Homeschool graduate Ariel Simmons explains, "I was set free when I was seven – not just from the school building, but from the notion that I could learn only what was given me to learn, when the powers-that-were deemed I should learn it. Since then, I have been the power-that-is, designing my schooling around my own interests. The audience is much more receptive this way."

Unschoolers say that people learn best when their interests direct the learning. Families using an interest-initiated-learning approach to homeschoooling allow their teens the freedom to allocate time in concert with their interests, and, thereby "learn best." Musicians and writers and artists follow their muse – all day, if they choose. Budding scientists and engineers immerse themselves in hands-on projects. These teenagers often outstrip their parents, not only educating themselves, but also learning – through trial and error – to find their own resources.

TRAVEL

When children reach their teens, most parents feel ready to let them travel alone. Of course, kids in school can and do travel, as well. But there is a difference. Our two homeschoolers found that they could take advantage of more travel opportunities than their schooled friends, simply because they had time.

Examples? When we lived in New Mexico, both our kids – at ages 13 and 14 – took several two-week trips to fix houses in an impoverished Pittsburgh neighborhood. Our son Jeff traveled to the Alabama Space Camp facility for seven day sessions three times. In addition, from the age of 13 to 17, he attended four or five Civil Air Patrol encampments all over the nation. Our daughter Tamara, having completed what we defined as high school by age 16 and not ready for college, spent nine months in Australia on a student-exchange program. Both kids traveled alone frequently to see out-of-state extended family.

WORK EXPERIENCE

Many kids who attend school hold volunteer and paying jobs. Homeschoolers are no different. They volunteer at hospitals, libraries, radio stations, museums, and parks. They hold a wide variety of paying jobs, ranging from entry level McDonald's positions to running their own businesses.

What advantage does homeschooling offer, then? Our kids found two things. First, they could get *better* volunteer and paying jobs as homeschoolers. Why? Because they were available during the day and could schedule academics around work and volunteer opportunities rather than vice versa. And they could work more hours. Coordinators of volunteer programs, especially, appreciate this and reward it with more responsibility. Second, as homeschoolers, our kids had time to explore *more* community activities. From ages 13-18, each of our teenagers was usually volunteering in two or three places and working for pay in one or two other places.

TIME

Homeschooling – by virtue of its efficiency – creates time for our kids. (In my more melodramatic moments, I liken home education to giving children back their lives.) Creating time is important for two reasons:

*You and your teenagers can use that time to customize learning. As described above, homeschoolers have enough time for personal projects, college courses, travel, volunteer and paying work – and for family.

*More importantly, teenagers freed from the scheduling demands of school can actually spend time alone – sitting outside on the grass and watching the clouds roll by, if they feel like it. I agree with John Taylor Gatto, New York State Teacher of the Year and homeschooling supporter who, in Dumbing Us Down, says, "Private time is absolutely essential if a private identity is going to develop, and private time is equally essential to the development of a code of private values, without which we aren't really individuals at all."

FAMILY CLOSENESS

One HEM Bulletin Board poster recently wrote, "Many teens pull away from family, discounting parents' attitudes and philosophies. In contrast, our son has grown closer to the family and actually asks for our opinions! I love being able to discuss news events and anything else based on our value system and life experience rather than allowing a classroom teacher 'first crack'."

I agree. Now that my kids are out on their own, I am so glad we spent their teenage years *together*. We played games, hiked and biked and skied, made gourmet meals and desserts, traveled, played piano, enjoyed movies, and talked and talked and talked. Both kids, now 23 and 21, tell me they would not change a thing.

REDUCE PEER PRESSURE

Another homeschooling mother and poster to the HEM bulletin boards reports that homeschooling gives teenagers "a chance to mature and grow in a safe, measured way." She says that her son can pursue interests and endeavors when *he* feels ready. As an example, she pointed out that he would turn 16 in a few weeks, but will likely wait several months before getting his driver's license. At school, we all know the pressure this young man would feel to *get that license*, whether he was ready or not.

Homeschooling does not eliminate peer pressure. Even in the homeschool co-op where I teach handbells and recorders, we have a contingent sporting backwards baseball caps. There is an important difference, though. Homeschoolers, unlike those who attend school, do not have to deal with peer pressure every 45-50 minutes, six to seven times per day, five days per week.

Instead, homeschooling reduces peer pressure to manageable levels that occur when teens see friends at activities, in informal gatherings, and in the neighborhood. The difference is pronounced. While the backwards-baseball-cap homeschoolers have been influenced by a teenage fad, they are, each and every one, conversational and pleasant to be around.

SAVE MONEY

Is it possible that it could be cheaper to homeschool than attend public school? Yes, it is. Discounting the salary mom or dad might be earning elsewhere, a typical high school homeschooler might spend $200-$400 per year on academic materials (many

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spend less). In that same period of time, a homeschooler, with a 10-hour per week minimum wage job, can earn $150-$200 per month. Homeschooled teens also have time to *trade* work for lessons and tutoring. As an example, I (a music teacher) trade housekeeping for piano lessons.

Contrast this with the near-constant fundraisers and money for "special" events and programs at high school. Many schools now charge fees for everything from computer time to cheerleading uniforms. Then there are dances, sports, music – all require extra payment. One parent described how it can mount up, saying, "Last year, for our daughter's tenth grade education at a public school, we spent close to $1,000, all told. And that doesn't count the clothing purchases needed to 'keep up'."

THE BIGGEST SECRET

I attended grades K-12, followed by four years of college. In all that time, the notion that I could direct my own learning never occurred to me. Someone may have suggested it, but the scheduling, grading, and teachers sent just the opposite message: "We are the experts; do this Our Way." Maybe that was the reason that my 1960's friends and I laughed at anyone who suggested that learning might be fun.

In contrast, homeschooling my teenagers gave me, the parent, the opportunity to reassess my own education and *the bigger opportunity to enjoy learning*. Homeschooling teenagers is fun! My life experience made biology and American history much more interesting the second time around.. We discussed our current reading. We gardened, leading to many "aha" moments for both me and my children. My daughter and I studied Latin together – and the background has enhanced my understanding of both the English language and Western civilization ever since. We practiced for the Geography Bee for months – enriching all our travel.

It's great time. Don't miss it.

BOOKLETS IN THE SERIES:

HAPPILY HOMESCHOOLING TEENS by Cafi Cohen

MOVING INTO THE WORLD

DO IT YOURSELF, DO IT BETTER, DO IT FOR LESS

THE THREE R'S

BEYOND THE THREE R'S

HIGH SCHOOL REQUIREMENTS & COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

ENCOURAGEMENT

Cafi Cohen, homeschooling mom, is the author of ***"And What About College?" How Homeschooling Leads To Admissions To The Best Colleges and Universities, 2nd Edition*** (Holt Associates, 2000) and ***Homeschooling: The Teen Years*** (Prima, 2000). She writes columns for *Home Education Magazine, Homeschooling Today,* and the *LINK*. Her website, Homeschool-Teens-College, contains helps for families homeschoooling 11-18 year-olds at www.homeschoolteenscollege.net. She also presents workshops at homeschool conferences nationwide. For more information about Cafi's books and workshops, contact her at: 805 473-4963 or 473-9045 or at cfcohen@pacbell.net.